THE WHITE NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL PRISONERS IN THE U.S.

Speech given at the Internation Tribunal
by Rita "Bo" Brown, October 3, 1992

I am very honored to be here today, at this tribunal which condemns 500 years of genocide and celebrates 500 years of resistance. I come speaking about the nearly 35 white political prisoners presently being held in US prisons and jails - many of whom are imprisoned because of their solidarity with oppressed nations and peoples in the US and around the world. I speak from experience and deep feeling for I am a former political prisoner myself having spent 8 1/2 years in federal prisons around the country because of my actions as a member of the George Jackson Brigade.

In those years I was moved from prison to prison. During that time I spent almost a year in isolation in Davis Hall at Alderson. This was the first special control unit for political women in the Federal system. Sister Assata Shakur and I were held there along with reactionary and Nazi prisoners - the government's threat to us was very clear. I was also kept for extra long periods in isolation and threatened and harassed specifically because I am a lesbian. This was not all that unusual treatment however, for my experience mirrors that of all the political prisoners. Yet our very existence is still denied by the US government and not seen or understood by most people in this country.

The strategy of the US government towards all political prisoners and POW's held in prisons is to criminalize them -- to disguise their political identities under the rhetoric of criminal activity. But they are not criminals. All of these white North American political prisoners have been convicted of and imprisoned for activities which are strictly political in nature.

These political prisoners and POW's are not a new phenomenon but are part of the history of the resistance in the Americas. In fact under international law, as well as the Constitution of the US, people not only have the right but the absolute responsibility to resist the illegal policies and practices of the oppressor and colonizing nation. And that's what they have done.

The North American political prisoners draw on a history of white resistance which includes the anti-slavery/abolitionist movement, those who helped in the Underground Railroad, women's rights activists, labor and working class organizers and supporters of anti-colonialism and anti militarism. Some of their names are familiar: John Brown, Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, Ruth Reynolds and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg; but most of the names of <u>our</u> historical grandmothers and grandfathers remain unknown to us because the <u>his</u>torians don't want us to know about them.

Some of these political prisoners come from working class or poor communities, some were already ex-cons, and still others

were college students, but a common thread runs through all the their stories: that is the decision to take action. Action in support of self-determination; action against racism; action against US military and nuclear policy; action against apartheid in South Africa and action in solidarity with workers and poor people around the world.

In order to understand them and their situation better we have to go back a little in history.

If you were living in this country in the 60's and 70's you had to be affected by the struggles for freedom and social justice. The women and men who are in prison today are no exception and are the products of these times.

Many of them were active in support of the Civil rights movement and were influenced by Malcolm X's demand for self determination and the organizing of Martin Luther King, both of whom would be assassinated by 1968. Others worked with the Black Panther Party, often in defense of BPP members who were imprisoned for political activities. Many came to work also with Native American, Mexicano/Chicano and other Third world liberation struggles. Along with millions of others they consistently opposed US policy in Vietnam and were part of the anti-war movement. There were mass demonstrations throughout the country, marches on Washington, student strikes, sit-ins and the burning of draft cards. There were also thousands of acts of sabotage against academic, corporate, military and government targets which ranged from property damage to bombings.

This was also the period when women began to be more conscious about their own oppression and began to demand liberation and when lesbians and gay men came out of the closet and went into the streets demanding an end to gay oppression.

During these years a prisoner's rights movement developed led mostly by Black prisoners and with close ties to the BPP and other community groups. Many of these white political prisoners worked with these organizations and thus came to better understand the integral part that prisons play in this society. They came to understand this country needed to control its people and criminalize, jail or kill those it either couldn't control or didn't need.

The government's response to this legitimate protest and sense of empowerment was swift, repressive and violent. COINTELPRO, the FBI's counter-intelligence program was responsible for the destruction of the BPP and the disruption of the American Indian Movement. Hundreds of BPP members and other Black activists like Fred Hamptom and Bunchy Carter were killed or jailed. The same was true for Native people struggling for sovereignty. This period also saw the killing of students at Kent and Jackson state

universities and the widespread use of grand jury witch hunts which were designed to further disrupt legal organizations.

Out of these experiences came the understanding that US society is based on the rape and plunder of Native lands, the expropriation of life and labor of African slaves and the class exploitation of European, Asian and Mexican workers. People were enraged at the racism so basic to this country and were determined not to be part of it. Many began to see that there was a connection between the colonialism here at home and the war of imperialism in Vietnam.

It was during this time that activists in various parts of the country independently decided to begin armed resistance, expropriations and sabotage. These were difficult steps to take but were all done in pursuit of their vision for change.

This vision included changing century old oppressive practices which promote hatred and which create psychological and physical damage and destruction. It meant creating a society based on self-determination for oppressed peoples both inside and outside the US based on an end to white supremacy. A society which was not based on class divisions. It meant creating a society where lesbians and gay men could be proud of who they were. And it meant creating a non-sexist society women could be equal, free and not afraid. Finally all these people are driven by a vision of a future based not on greed and profit but one that truly answers people's needs.

This vision and spirit of resistance continued to move North Americans to action during the 70's and 80's. Thousands of people organized to resist the building of nuclear weapons, the intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador and in solidarity with Black forces against apartheid in South Africa. Many whites demonstrated and organized against racism and the growth of the Klan and other white supremacist groups. Thousands of people signed pledges of resistance to participate in civil disobedience if Nicaragua was invaded and participated in these acts as intervention in Central America increased. Women marched en mass against cut backs in reproductive rights and protected abortion clinics against attacks. Lesbians and gay men demanded that the society deal with the AIDS pandemic and pushed for broader acceptance of lesbian and gay rights. Again, during the Gulf War, thousands of white people joined in the streets protesting US policy.

Not much has changed. We can understand the desire to resist very well. Genocidal conditions are increasing for Black and other communities of color. There is a rise of police brutality, drugs and jailings and as we all know a dramatic decrease in social services. Violence against women is way up -a woman gets raped every 2 minutes. The right wing scapegoats and whip ups hysteria against gays and lesbians - who can forget "family values".

Abortion is all but gone, the courts are making one right wing decision after another and if we don't look out soon we won't even have air we can breathe or earth we can stand on.

Before we get more specific about who these prisoners are we'd like to take time to define what we mean by political prisoner. For some of us this definition means those in prison as a direct result of their political actions, affiliations and beliefs. Still others wish to extend that definition to those imprisoned for social crimes who have become politicized while inside prison and who therefore suffer extra repression for it. Some of us also think it important to extend the definition of political prisoner to those imprisoned for their sexual orientation (adopted by Amnesty International this year) and to those imprisoned for defending themselves against and/or fighting their abusers, such as women imprisoned for killing their batterers.

So let's get down to specifics:

First there are prisoners who consider themselves to be revolutionary anti-imperialists.

The Jonathan Jackson-Sam Melville Brigade and United Freedom Front were armed clandestine organizations which emerged from the experiences of working class people in poor communities, in the military and in prison. The Jackson-Melville Brigade was held responsible for a number of bombings of government and corporate offices in the mid to late 70's. These actions raised the demands of independence for Puerto Rico and an end to US support for apartheid in South Africa, among other issues. The UFF operated from the early to mid 80's and demanded the end of governmental and corporate support for South Africa, an end to US intervention in Central America and freedom for all political prisoners and POW's in US prisons.

Today the people charged with these acts are known as the "Ohio 7." They include Raymond Levasseur, Thomas Manning (both Vietnam Vets who had spent years in prison for social crimes) Jaan Laaman, Carol Manning, Richard Williams, Barbara Curzi and Pat Gross Levasseur (these last two are both out on parole).

Other North American anti-imperialists are imprisoned for their direct aid to armed clandestine Black organizations in the early 80's. Judy Clark, David Gilbert and Kathy Boudin are serving life sentences in prison. They are charged with aiding an attempted expropriation (robbery for political reasons) of an armored truck in New York state in 1981. This action was claimed by the Revolutionary Armed Task Force. Marilyn Buck was also charged as result of this action as well as for assisting in the escape of Assata Shakur.

Susan Rosenberg and Timothy Blunk were captured in 1984 on

charges of conspiracy to possess explosives. Later, they along with Alan Berkman, Laura Whitehorn, Linda Evans and Marilyn Buck were charged with a number of bombings claimed by the Armed Resistance Unit and the Red Guerrilla Resistance. Included in these is the 1983 bombing of the Capitol in solidarity with the people of Grenada and in retaliation against the US invasion that year. Other actions were taken against corporate and military targets in solidarity with the peoples of Central America and against intervention, against the Zionist occupation of Palestine and to protest police killings of Black and Latino people in New York City.

Once again I come to my own background as a former member of the George Jackson Brigade. We were a multi-racial armed organization which operated in Northwest in the mid to late 70's. We took our name from George Jackson, the Black revolutionary who was assassinated in prison on August 21, 1971. We were composed mainly of working class ex-convicts and engaged in acts of armed resistance in solidarity with the struggle of Native people for sovereignty, in support of a strike by Seattle Auto workers and in support of struggles by Washington State prisoners for basic human rights. I've already told you that I was in prison for 8 and 1/2 years. My comrades, Mark Cook, a Black prisoner and Ed Meade, a white prisoner remain in prison to this day for these actions.

There are also anti-authoritarian prisoners. Bill Dunn and Larry Giddings have been in prison since 1979 for participating in expropriations and the liberation of a comrade from jail. Richard Picarielo has been in prison since 1977 for armed actions against US oppression and imperialism. Due to be released after 15 years, the state is scrambling to extend his sentence because he's dared to continue struggling from inside.

Next, I'd like to talk about those people who consider themselves part of the Ploughshares.

Taking their name from the famous biblical quote about turning swords into plowshares, these anti-nuclear and anti-military activists come from a religious conviction and tradition that insists they must not sit by while weapons of destruction are being made and used.

Over the last ten years many have entered military bases and destroyed military property directly, while others have born witness and engaged in symbolic acts. The most recent case is that of Peter Lumsdain and Keith Kjoller who destroyed the Novstar computer - part of the US's first strike capability - to the tune of 2 1/2 million dollars. They received 18 months for this "crime."

Throughout the 80's the government also prosecuted members of the Sanctuary movement. These include clergy, church workers and

lay activists who have "illegally" provided refuge to Central and South American refugees fleeing US sponsored repression in their homelands.

Following a historic tradition, there are also military resisters. For example Gilliam Kerley was sentenced to three years in prison plus a $10,000.00 fine not merely for refusing to register but because he persisted in organizing against registration and the draft. Military resisters continue to sit in jail as a result of their refusal to serve in the Gulf war.

The US legal system is also used to serve the government's allies in effecting their own counter-insurgency programs. In so doing it echoes and enforces US foreign policy. Along with Haitians, Central and South Americans and other Third World people there are several European Nationals being held in US prisons.

Silvia Baraldini, a citizen of Italy received a 40 year sentence for aiding in the escape of Assata Shakur. Although the Italian government has said that it wants her back in Italy to serve her time in an Italian prison - in accord with the Straussberg Convention), the US justice department refused to let her go claiming the Italians won't be harsh enough.

There are also 9 alleged members or supporters of the IRA, Irish Republican Army held in US prisons by the US government.

The same counterinsurgency tactics that have been detailed in other presentations have been used against white political prisoners. These include sophisticated spying and infiltration techniques, the jailing of many white activists for refusing to testify and/or cooperate with grand juries, the use of broad and vague conspiracy laws to criminalize people for association and belief and the use of preventative detention to deny bail. Laura Whitehorn was held without bail for 4 years before going to trial.

Finally, because they are political prisoners they get some of the longest sentences in the world. Their political beliefs are used as a basis to impose sentences that are, in many instances, the equivalent of natural life in prison. This reason for this is that they are revolutionaries.

For example, in 1986, a man convicted of planning and carrying out bombings, without making warning calls, of ten occupied health clinics where abortions were performed was sentenced to ten years in prison and was paroled after 46 months. In contrast, Raymond Levasseur was convicted of bombing four unoccupied military targets in protest against US foreign policies. He received 45 years in prison.

Or this one: A Ku Klux Klansman, charged with violations of the Neutrality Act and with possessing a boat load of explosives

and weapons to be used in an invasion of the Caribbean island of Dominica received 8 years. Linda Evans was convicted of purchasing 4 weapons with false ID and she was sentenced to 40 years - the longest sentence ever imposed for this offense.

Prisons are a horrible experience for everyone in this country.

This was well documented in the Prison Discipline Study Report issued in 1991. This national survey revealed that both physical and psychological abuse, so severe that it approaches the internationally accepted definition for torture, is the norm in maximum security prisons throughout the United States. That's the case for <u>all prisoners</u>.

In this context the North American prisoners - like political prisoners everywhere - are systematically singled out for particularly severe sentences and constant harassment once incarcerated. This includes particular abuse directed at the women and lesbians, including sexual assault and threats -- often at the hands of male guards.

One of the most brutal weapons in the government's arsenal is the control unit prison: a special maximum security unit based on total physical and sensory deprivation. Control unit prisons are currently the trend in new prison construction in the US. Their goal is to reduce prisoners to a state of submission where it becomes possible to destroy their bodies, their spirit, their will and ultimately their resistance and very self definition.

While officials claim that these units are only for the most violent disciplinary problems, more and more political prisoners are being placed there solely for their political beliefs. For instance, Alan Berkman, Raymond Levasseur and Tom Manning were all sent directly to Marion Control Unit after sentencing.

Silvia Baraldini and Susan Rosenberg along with Puerto Rican POW, Alejandrina Torres were sent to the Lexington High Security Unit for two years in 1986 -- the justification: their political beliefs and associations. Once it was closed, a result of a massive campaign inside and out, Susan and Silvia were sent to the new control unit for women at Marianna. Marilyn Buck was also sent there directly after sentencing.

In addition to isolation in control units, all political prisoners are more frequently subjected to cruel and inhumane punishment. These include torture, sexual assault, strip and cavity searches (including those by male guards on women prisoners), punitive transfers, censorship and denial of medical care, which has had grave consequences in several cases. Alan Berkman, suffering from Hodgkin's Disease nearly died several times while in prison because officials withheld necessary medical

treatment. Silvia Baraldini's abdominal lumps - which anyone could feel, were ignored for months only to reveal that she had an aggressive form of uterine cancer. Silvia continues to have difficulty receiving medical attention.

Imprisonment doesn't mean the end of these revolutionaries' organizing and political work. They continue once they're inside. For many of them this has mean organizing resistance to oppressive prison policies, publishing prison newsletters, providing legal help and assistance, facilitating courses, work stoppages and hunger strikes. For others it's also meant becoming AIDS activists. In fact some of the women prisoners are responsible for developing the most comprehensive models (like ACE at Bedford Hills and PLACE in Pleasanton) for AIDS education and peer counselling in prisons in the country!

But even in these cases political prisoners are punished for being too successful in their work. For instance, Ed Meade who organized Men Against Sexism at Walla Walla was prevented from continuing his work on prisoner on prisoner rape. Bill Dunn was kept at Marion for years for publishing a newsletter there and David Gilbert was moved from place to place for developing work on AIDS in prison, finally prevented from doing any work at all. Quite recently, Laura Whitehorn was transferred from Lexington to Marianna after she participated in the fist women's prison uprising in 20 years when the women protested an attack on a Black woman prisoner by a male guard. Tim Blunk was moved back to Marion from Lewisberg after there was a strike there of Black and Puerto Rican prisoners.

Why does the government so determinedly continue to attack and repress these women and men once they are incarcerated? It needs to break their spirits and prevent them from continuing to educate and mobilize from within the prison walls. On the one hand these prisoners are used as examples to intimate whole movements and communities from continuing their resistance. The government wants it made very clear the price one can pay for being a white person willing to take a stand against this racist and inhuman system is very high. On the other hand they need these revolutionaries to be buried away and forgotten.

We won't let that happen!

Clearly now is a time for action. We too can follow the examples of these brave women and men who have given so much of their lives for freedom and justice. We must recognize who and what they are: Political prisoners. We must demand their freedom so they can be back on the streets where they belong.

I know I speak for all the white political prisoners when I say that it's been a great honor to be able to speak to you today at this International Tribunal. All of us pledge to continue our

resistance to the crimes outlined by today's speakers and commit ourselves to continue to work until there is a world where everyone can have true justice and freedom.